

Career Planning Steps

Welcome to the AARP" says the letter to which my membership card is attached, formally recognizing my status as old. As a member of the baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964), I have been in the company of approximately 77 million Americans through every one of my life transitions. In contrast to the generation just prior and just following the baby boomers, our life's journey has been one big group experience. To use an analogy I heard recently, we are the "rabbit in the digestive system of the snake," and we will be making our way into retirement over the next couple of decades.

As a career counselor, I believe that career planning is a lifelong process. To this point, however, I have promoted its virtues mainly to secondary school stu-

dents who are just starting their careers. I am now in a position, you know, being old and all, to apply various career planning tools to my own process, and have re-discovered the Career Decision-Making Tool (see page 5). Though developed for use with high school students, I am going to talk about the six steps as they apply to me, in the hopes that others in my cohort will benefit.

1. Engaging: The subtitle of this stage is "knowing I need to make a choice," and for me the need is somewhat self-imposed. I could continue to work in a similar position to the one I have enjoyed for the past 6-7 years, but I am choosing to use the end to my project funding as an opportunity to make a new choice.

2. Understanding: This step refers to understanding not only one's personal career-related characteristics (e.g., abilities, interests, work values), but also the understanding of one's options. I am interested in making this final stage of my career the most meaningful and productive of my life. Though I feel that I still have much to offer as a worker, I may be challenged to help others perceive and utilize my talents and skills.

3. Exploring: I am currently in the process of the information gathering that is the foundation of this step, allowing me to contemplate my own definition of career success and to expand my list of options. I want to identify three or four specific options that hold

the greatest promise in terms of meeting my latest career objectives.

4. Evaluating: As I wrap up my exploration, I will be prompted to summarize my personal characteristics and create a matrix that will help me identify the career options most consistent with my needs and wants. I may discover that there are challenges to be dealt with (e.g., financial, skill deficits, role conflicts) before I can move to the next step.

5. Acting: In order to effect a successful career change, I am looking forward to testing out the most promising options before I make a final commitment to just one. In fact, I anticipate that I will be acting on a short-term career change and, at the same time, addressing some skill deficits that become more defined as a result of the evaluating step.

6. Evaluating: This is the full implementation step, but highlights the need for reflection on the process as a whole, as well as the final result.

With any luck, this isn't the last time I'll be accessing the Career Decision-Making Tool in order to advance my career goals. According to a number of recent articles that caught my interest, U. S. employers are starting to recognize the need to recruit and retain older workers. This new recognition on the part of employers may happily coincide with baby boomers' expectations for long and productive careers.

Cohort	Years of Birth	Age Range in 1999	Cohort Population in 1999 (millions)
Early Cohort	1946-55	44-53	37.1
Later Cohort	1956-64	35-43	39.8
Total	1946-64	35-53	76.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1999, civilian non-institutional population





Career Decision-Making Tool